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SUBJECT: ASAD TELLS NODEL US LACKS VISION

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¶1. (U) CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR THEODORE H. KATTOUF, REASON 1.5 B/D.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY: IN A TWO-HOUR DISCUSSION WITH CONGRESSMAN DAVID PRICE, PRESIDENT AL-ASAD SAID THE US ADMINISTRATION HAS NO CLEAR MIDDLE EAST VISION. THE DISPARATE ADMINISTRATION VOICES HURT THE US REGIONALLY. PROGRESS TOWARDS ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE REQUIRES A CLEAR AND CONSISTENT VISION, AND IMPARTIAL US MEDIATION. ASAD COMPLAINED THAT THERE IS NO POLITICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN SYRIA AND THE US, AND THAT THE RELATIONSHIP 'ONLY COMES THROUGH ISRAEL.' ANY SYRIAN EXPRESSION OF SUPPORT FOR US POLICY COULD ONLY COME AFTER EXTENSIVE BILATERAL DIALOGUE. THE PROPOSED QUARTET-INITIATED CONFERENCE COULD TURN INTO A POINTLESS PHOTO OP, SINCE THE PRINCIPLES FOR A NEGOTIATED PEACE WERE ALREADY ARTICULATED AND LAUNCHED AT MADRID. US POLICY TOWARDS IRAQ HAS SERVED ONLY TO MAKE SADDAM STRONGER; THE US SHOULD HAVE CONSULTED WITH REGIONAL COUNTRIES BEFORE THREATENING UNILATERAL MILITARY ACTION. A FREED ARAFAT CAN STILL DO NOTHING, SINCE HE HAS NO RESOURCES AND THE INTIFADA IS THE DOMINANT REALITY. THE JENIN AND NABLUS 'MASSACRES,' WHICH 'KILLED OVER SIX HUNDRED PALESTINIANS,' HAVE POSTPONED THE POSSIBILITY OF PEACE. ASAD SAID THAT 'NO ONE WANTS TO HEAR' TALK OF PEACE, AND SYRIA WOULD WAIT UNTIL EMOTIONS COOLED BEFORE DECIDING WHAT TO DO. HE CALLED FOR MORE VISITS BY CONGRESSMEN AND SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS TO SYRIA, SO THEY COULD GET A CLEARER PICTURE OF REGIONAL REALITIES. WE TAKE ASAD AT HIS WORD THAT, GIVEN THE ENFLAMED PASSIONS AND DYNAMIC REGIONAL SITUATION, SYRIAN POLICY WILL MOVE TOWARD ITS TRADITIONAL DEFAULT OF 'WAITING.' END SUMMARY

¶3. (C) ON MAY 4, CONGRESSMAN DAVID PRICE (D-NC) MET FOR TWO HOURS WITH SYRIAN PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASAD. AMBASSADOR KATTOUF AND POLOFF (NOTETAKER) WERE ALSO PRESENT, AS WAS WAYNE OWENS, PRESIDENT OF THE CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION; FM SHARA AND INTERPRETER/ADVISOR DR. BUTHAYNA SHA'BAN ATTENDED ON THE SYRIAN SIDE.

¶4. (C) PRESIDENT AL-ASAD TOLD PRICE HE'D MET A LOT OF HIS COLLEAGUES RECENTLY (PRICE WAS THE EIGHTH CODEL PRESIDENT BASHAR RECEIVED IN RECENT MONTHS), AND WAS HAPPY TO MEET HIM. THE US ADMINISTRATION SEEMED NOT TO BE FULLY 'IN THE PICTURE.' CONGRESSMAN PRICE'S VISIT, LIKE THOSE OF HIS PREDECESSORS, COULD HELP CONVEY A CLEARER PICTURE OF REGIONAL REALITIES TO THE ADMINISTRATION.

¶5. (C) CONGRESSMAN PRICE THANKED ASAD FOR SYRIA'S EFFECTIVE COUNTER-TERRORISM COOPERATION, AND TOLD HIM THAT HE WAS ENCOURAGED NOW THAT THE ADMINISTRATION WAS FULLY ENGAGED IN THE REGION. ALTHOUGH THE RECENT VISIT OF SECRETARY POWELL DIDN'T SOLVE ALL PROBLEMS, THE SYRIAN AND LEBANESE LEG OF THE TRIP WAS SUCCESSFUL, FOR WHICH HE ALSO THANKED ASAD.

US: NO CLEAR VISION, NO REAL DIALOGUE WITH SYRIA

¶6. (C) ASAD SAID SYRIA AND OTHER ARAB COUNTRIES HAVE DONE ALL THEY COULD TO KEEP THE US FULLY ENGAGED. THROUGH MEETINGS AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE, SYRIA HAS REPROACHED THE US FOR ITS REGIONAL ABSENCE AND ENCOURAGED IT TOWARDS GREATER ENGAGEMENT. ONE OF THE CAUSES OF JENIN WAS THIS US ABSENCE. ADDITIONALLY, THE US HAS ALSO MADE MANY MISTAKES. FOR EXAMPLE, PRESIDENT BUSH ERRED IN CALLING SHARON A 'MAN OF PEACE' WHILE THE LATTER WAS KILLING PALESTINIANS. SUCH

STATEMENTS OBSTRUCT ANY POSITIVE US ROLE.

17. (C) REPEATING EARLIER CRITICISM THAT THE US SPEAKS WITH A MULTIPLICITY OF VOICES, ASAD ASSERTED THAT 'THE ADMINISTRATION HAS NO CLEAR VISION ABOUT WHAT TO DO.' ASAD ALSO COMPLAINED THAT THAT SYRIA DOESN'T SEE US OFFICIALS UNLESS THERE IS AN 'ISRAELI PROBLEM,' AND THAT CURRENTLY SYRIA HAS NO REAL DIALOGUE WITH THE ADMINISTRATION. 'I'VE MET WITH SECRETARY POWELL TWICE, AND ONE OF THESE VISITS (THE MORE RECENT) WAS NOT EVEN PLANNED BEFOREHAND.' HE HAD ASKED THE SECRETARY HOW COULD ANYTHING BE DISCUSSED IN ONE HOUR, LET ALONE THE GOLAN AND THE MEPP, WHEN THEY'D NOT MET IN EIGHTEEN MONTHS.

SYRIAN STATEMENT OF SUPPORT

18. (C) PRICE TOLD ASAD THAT IT WOULD BE CONSTRUCTIVE FOR HIM TO PUBLICLY EXPRESS HIS AND HIS COUNTRY'S SUPPORT FOR AN ACTIVE US REGIONAL ROLE, OR TO DO SO PRIVATELY IF A PUBLIC EXPRESSION WERE NOT POSSIBLE. ASAD SAID THAT WHATEVER STAND SYRIA TOOK WOULD BE A PUBLIC ONE. IN ANY CASE, SYRIA SUPPORTED POLICIES, NOT OFFICIALS. SYRIA WOULD SUPPORT AN APPROPRIATE US ROLE. BUT SYRIA HAS ITS DIFFERENCES WITH THE ADMINISTRATION, THE ISSUES ARE VERY COMPLEX, SYRIA WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO PUBLICLY SUPPORT PRESIDENT BUSH UNTIL AFTER EXTENDED BILATERAL DIALOGUE. FOR THIS REASON, THE SYRIAN PRESIDENT STATED, HE HAD CALLED FOR A BROADER BILATERAL DIALOGUE WITH THE US.

19. (C) PRICE ASKED ASAD FOR HIS REACTION TO THE SUMMER CONFERENCE PROPOSED BY THE QUARTET TO ADVANCE THE MEPP. ASAD SAID HE HAD NOT BEEN BRIEFED, AND ASKED WHAT WOULD BE THE POINT OF THE CONFERENCE. WHAT CAN THIS CONFERENCE ADD TO THE MADRID LAND FOR PEACE FRAMEWORK? ANSWERING HIS OWN QUESTION, ASAD SAID THAT A CONFERENCE COULDN'T ACHIEVE PEACE; ONLY NEGOTIATIONS COULD. THIS CONFERENCE WOULD BE CEREMONIAL.

110. (C) AMBASSADOR KATTOUF SUGGESTED THE CONFERENCE COULD GIVE THE MEPP A NEW IMPETUS BY ALLOWING THE QUARTET, AND OTHER ARAB COUNTRIES TO RECOMMIT THEMSELVES TO A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT BASED ON THE MADRID PRINCIPLES. ASAD RESPONDED THAT IT COULD BECOME A MEDIA EVENT. THE EU AND THE UN WANT TO PLAY A CONSTRUCTIVE ROLE, AND THE ARAB COUNTRIES HAVE ALWAYS EXPRESSED THEIR DESIRE TO DO LIKEWISE. REGARDLESS OF A CONFERENCE, EVERYBODY WAS READY FOR PEACE. BUT THE RECENT ISRAELI 'MASSACRES' HAVE DELAYED THE PEACE PROCESS LONGER THAN MERELY THE TIME THAT SHARON REMAINED IN OFFICE. ASAD SAID HE SAW NO BENEFIT IN THE CONFERENCE, BUT IT WAS UP TO THOSE PROPOSING IT TO STATE ITS PURPOSE.

111. (C) PRICE AGREED THERE WAS NOTHING NEW ABOUT THE THREE PRIORITIES STATED BY SECRETARY POWELL, BUT IT WAS ALSO TRUE THAT THE MEPP WAS IN SHAMBLES. THE HOPE WAS THAT THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE COULD BE BROKEN. PRICE ASKED ASAD HOW COULD WE GET A FRESH START? WHAT WERE VIABLE ALTERNATIVES TO THIS CONFERENCE? WHAT ELSE SHOULD THE US DO BESIDES SEEKING TO CONTAIN THE VIOLENCE?

112. (C) ANSWERING, ASAD SAID DURING THE PAST PERIOD THERE HAVE BEEN MANY FAILED INITIATIVES. HE EXPECTED THESE FAILURES AND TOLD THE US SO (READ: TENET-MITCHELL). WHY DOES THE US ALWAYS THINK IN TERMS OF 'LAUNCHING INITIATIVES?' IF THERE IS NO INITIAL CLARITY, THE CONCERNED PARTIES WILL 'WALK A DISTANCE AND THEN BE LOST AND AT JEOPARDY.' SWITCHING ANALOGIES, ASAD SAID THAT SOME MEDICINES ARE ONLY TEMPORARY AND DON'T TREAT THE CAUSE OF THE DISEASE. WE MUST GO BACK TO THE 'RIGHT INITIATIVE' - MADRID, WHICH WILL LEAD US TO PEACE.

FORGET NEW CONFERENCE; ENFORCE MADRID

113. (C) ASAD SAID THAT THE STARTING POINT FOR THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION SEEMS TO BE SUPPORTING PM SHARON WHILE HE KILLS PALESTINIANS. THESE MASSACRES HAVE HAD A HUGE REGIONAL IMPACT AND HAVE HURT THE US, WHICH HAS LOST A LOT OF ITS

ARAB-WORLD, SEPTEMBER 11TH SYMPATHY. BUT THE PEOPLE CAN BE LED BEYOND ANTI-US FEELINGS, NOT BY FORCE, BUT BY POLITICAL DISCUSSION, AND THIS IS WHERE A BILATERAL US-SYRIAN DIALOGUE CAN BE VERY HELPFUL. WHEN THE US ADMINISTRATION IS 'IN THE PICTURE,' IT CAN ACT CORRECTLY AND WILL GET REGIONAL SUPPORT. THEREFORE, BILATERAL US-SYRIAN DIALOGUE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANY CONFERENCE INITIATIVE. ASAD SAID HE KNEW OF THE INFLUENCE OF DOMESTIC LOBBIES, AND THAT THE ARABS WERE NOT DOING THEIR JOB IN LOBBYING OR PRESENTING A TRUE PICTURE TO CONGRESS.

¶14. (C) CONGRESSMAN PRICE SAID THAT BILATERAL DISCUSSIONS AND THIS CONFERENCE WERE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE. HE KNEW THE APPARENT DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE US ADMINISTRATION WERE CAUSING PROBLEMS GLOBALLY. BUT SEPTEMBER 11TH HAD BEEN A 'WAKE-UP CALL' FOR PRESIDENT BUSH, AND NOW HE SHOULD BE TAKEN AT HIS WORD CONCERNING HIS DESIRE FOR A LASTING PEACE. SECRETARY POWELL IS THE PRESIDENT'S EMISSARY AND SPEAKS AUTHORITATIVELY ON HIS BEHALF. THEY BOTH NEED SYRIA'S HELP.

IRAQ

¶15. (C) RESPONDING TO WAYNE OWENS' QUESTION ON HIS VIEWS CONCERNING US ACTION AGAINST IRAQ, ASAD REPEATED HIS STANDARD LINE THAT THE ONLY ACTION ACCEPTABLE WAS IMPLEMENTING UN RESOLUTIONS. WHAT THE US WAS CONTEMPLATING WOULD NOT WORK, AND THE US NEEDED TO SERIOUSLY RECONSIDER ITS PLANS. THE US SHOULD CONSULT WITH COUNTRIES IN THE REGION; OTHERWISE, THE US LOSES. THE US ERROR LAY IN THINKING THAT MILITARY POWER COULD SOLVE EVERY PROBLEM.

¶16. (C) PRICE AGREED THAT VP CHENEY SHOULD HAVE COME TO SYRIA. HE ALSO AGREED THAT US MILITARY ACTION AGAINST IRAQ WAS LIKELY. HE TOLD ASAD THAT, WHILE HE STRONGLY BELIEVED THAT THIS SHOULD BE A LAST RESORT, IRAQ POSED A REAL WMD THREAT. PRICE EXPRESSED THE VIEW THAT THERE WERE INTERMEDIATE STEPS TO TAKE BEFORE MILITARY ACTION. ALTHOUGH THIS WAS HIS OWN VIEW, MANY IN THE CONGRESS SHARED IT.

ASAD'S LETTER TO BUSH

¶17. (C) COMMENTING THAT ASAD'S LETTER TO PRESIDENT BUSH FOLLOWING 9/11 HAD BEEN IMPORTANT, OWENS SUGGESTED THAT ANOTHER SUCH LETTER, COMMENTING ON THE GOOD THINGS THE ADMINISTRATION HAS DONE THUS FAR, WOULD ALSO BE USEFUL. ASAD SAID THAT HE WAS SURE THAT WHAT HE HAD SAID TODAY WOULD SIMILARLY BE RELAYED UPWARDS, SO THAT THE INFORMATION WOULD REACH THE PRESIDENT IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. (COMMENT: DESPITE REPEATED PROBING, ASAD GAVE NO INDICATION THAT THAT HE WOULD BE WILLING TO ISSUE A STATEMENT OF SUPPORT FOR REGIONAL US POLICY, EITHER PUBLICLY OR PRIVATELY).

ARAFAT TOOTHLESS, REGION INFLAMED, SYRIA WILL WAIT

¶18. (C) IN RESPONSE TO PRICE'S OBSERVATION THAT NEWLY-FREED ARAFAT FACED A MAJOR TEST IN STEMMING PALESTINIAN VIOLENCE, ASAD ASKED RHETORICALLY WHAT MEANS WERE LEFT FOR ARAFAT TO DO ANYTHING? PRICE REPLIED THAT ASAD HAD A POINT. HOWEVER, HE WAS CONCERNED - THE COMING DAYS AND WEEKS WERE CRITICAL, BUT HE WAS HOPEFUL THAT SYRIA COULD BE OF MAXIMUM ASSISTANCE. POWELL HAD TOLD ARAFAT THAT HE WAS DOWN TO HIS LAST CHANCE; THERE WAS A DESPERATE QUALITY IN THE AIR. WHAT DID PRESIDENT ASAD THINK FRIENDS OF THE PALESTINIANS SHOULD DO?

¶19. (C) ASAD REPEATED THAT ARAFAT COULD DO NOTHING. HE HAS NO POLICE, NO PRISON, AND THE ISRAELIS HAD EVEN KILLED HIS COOK. BUT EVEN BEFORE THESE WERE STRIPPED FROM HIM, HE WAS POWERLESS. THE INTIFADA WAS THE DE FACTO REALITY THAT ALL HAD TO DEAL WITH. ALTHOUGH ARAFAT HAD EMERGED FROM HIS LATEST ORDEAL WITH A HEROIC AURA, IN THE LAST THREE DAYS HE HAS REVEALED HIMSELF TO BE AN ACTOR. SYRIA HAS KNOWN FOR THIRTY YEARS THAT HE IS A LIAR. HE HASN'T CHANGED; THE US

DISCOVERED HIS NATURE TOO LATE. HE HAD MISLED THE US CONCERNING HIS ABILITIES AT A TIME WHEN 'NINETY PERCENT' OF THE SITUATION WAS OUTSIDE HIS CONTROL. EVEN HIS IMMEDIATE CIRCLE HAS REBELLED AGAINST HIM. ALTHOUGH SYRIA EXPECTS NOTHING FROM HIM, THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE. WHO IS THERE IF ARAFAT FALLS? - NOBODY.

¶20. (C) AS FOR THE FUTURE, ASAD DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT. 'WHAT CAN BE EXPECTED WHEN THE ISRAELIS KILL THE MOTHER AND BROTHER OF A PERSON WHO THEN HAS TO STAY IN THE SAME ROOM WITH THE DEAD BODIES FOR TWELVE HOURS?' ISRAEL HAD KILLED 'SIX HUNDRED PEOPLE' IN JENIN AND NABLUS, AND HAS NOW PRIMED THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE TO EXPLODE.

¶21. (C) CONTINUING, ASAD SAID 'WE CAN ALL EXPECT THE WORST, AND WE ALL WILL PAY FOR SHARON, WHO HAS DELAYED THE PEACE PROCESS UNTIL PEOPLE FORGET THESE ATROCITIES.' MUCH AS THE HORROR OF SEPTEMBER 11 WILL LONG REMAIN FRESH IN AMERICA'S MIND, SO TOO WILL THESE RECENTLY INFLICTED HORRORS LONG REMAIN IN PALESTINIAN AND ALL ARAB MINDS.

¶22. (C) THE US WAS PARTIALLY RESPONSIBLE, BECAUSE IT DID NOT STAND AGAINST SHARON AND THE PRO-ISRAELI LOBBY, ASAD MAINTAINED. THE ADMINISTRATION'S PERFORMANCE WAS SO WEAK WITH REGARDS TO ISRAEL THAT MANY PALESTINIANS CAME TO BELIEVE THAT FIGHTING WAS THE ONLY SOLUTION. THE PROBLEM WITH THE US WAS THAT IT ONLY LOOKED FOR A SOLUTION AFTER THE PROBLEM HAD GOTTEN OUT OF HAND. THE PICTURE WAS BLACK, AND FOR NOW, SYRIA WOULD WAIT.

ASAD: "OFF THE RECORD, I CAN SAY I WANT PEACE...

¶23. (C) ASAD SAID THAT 'OFF THE RECORD, I CAN SAY I WANT PEACE, BUT I CAN'T TELL THAT TO THE MEDIA, BECAUSE 'NO ONE WANTS TO HEAR IT.' HE REPEATED THAT THE SITUATION WAS STILL VERY EMOTIONAL, AND THAT SYRIA WOULD WAIT FOR EMOTIONS TO COOL, AT WHICH TIME IT COULD DISCERN THE UNDERLYING REALITIES. THE PRESENT TIME WAS ONE OF PARALYSIS, EVEN IN THOUGHT, 'BECAUSE THE ELEMENTS WERE NOT STABLE, AND THEREFORE THE RESULTS NOT ACCURATE.' THIS HOWEVER WAS NOT A CALL FOR PESSIMISM. ALTHOUGH THERE WILL BE DELAY, THE PEACE PROCESS EVENTUALLY WILL HAVE TO RESUME.

ISRAEL KILLS SYRIAN CROWN PRINCE INITIATIVE

¶24. (C) PRICE ASKED IF CROWN PRINCE ABDULLAH'S PEACE INITIATIVE WERE A WAY FORWARD. ASAD ANSWERED THAT SYRIA HAD SUPPORTED IT, WHICH HAD GIVEN IT LEGITIMACY. WITHIN THE ARAB WORLD IT WAS SEEN AS A GREAT OPPORTUNITY. BUT TWO DAYS AFTER THE ARAB SUMMIT, SHARON STARTED HIS MASSACRES. SYRIA HAD GIVEN LIFE TO THE CROWN PRINCE'S INITIATIVE; SHARON HAD KILLED IT TWO DAYS LATER.

ASAD: WE ARE THE PEACE PROCESS

¶25. (C) ASAD AGREED THAT SYRIA'S ROLE IN THE PEACE PROCESS WAS KEY, SINCE 'IF SYRIA IS NOT A PARTY TO THE PEACE PROCESS, WHO IS?' EGYPT AND JORDAN HAVE ALREADY SIGNED AGREEMENTS: SYRIA IS THE WHOLE PARTY, AND OTHERS SHOULD PLAY A SUPPORTING ROLE. ASAD IN TURN ASKED PRICE HOW THE US ADMINISTRATION COULD ANNOUNCE THAT THEY WERE SENDING PEOPLE TO THE REGION TO DISCUSS PEACE, AND HAVE THESE PEOPLE AVOID SYRIA.

¶26. (C) IN CLOSING, ASAD SAID HE WAS PLEASED WITH THIS DIALOGUE AND WITH CONGRESSMAN PRICE'S COMMENTS. HE ASKED CONGRESSMAN PRICE TO SEND HIS BEST REGARDS TO PRESIDENT BUSH.

¶27. (U) THIS CABLE WAS NOT CLEARED WITH CONGRESSMAN PRICE.

¶28. (C) COMMENTS: ASAD SEEMED RELAXED AND A BIT MORE REFLECTIVE THAN IN SOME OTHER MEETINGS. FOR ONCE, HE DID IMPLICITLY CLAIM TO HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS. MUCH OF WHAT HE

SAID WE'VE ALREADY HEARD: CHASTISING THE US FOR ITS PERCEIVED ABSENCE; CALLING FOR GREATER BILATERAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ADMINISTRATION; DECRYING SHARON'S TOXIC EFFECT ON THE PEACE PROCESS; AND CRITICIZING US PLANS TO 'BRING DOWN' SADDAM. NEW, ALTHOUGH EXPECTED, WAS HIS SKEPTICISM TOWARDS A PROPOSED SUMMER PEACE CONFERENCE AND HIS RELUCTANCE TO CONSIDER A LETTER OF SUPPORT TO PRESIDENT BUSH. CONCERNING THE SHARON-ARAFAT STRUGGLE, HE SEEMED AT A GENUINE LOSS AS TO WHAT MIGHT COME NEXT, ALTHOUGH RELATIVELY SURE THAT, GIVEN ARAFAT'S IMPOTENCE AND POPULAR PALESTINIAN RAGE, IT WOULD NOT BE GOOD. WE TAKE ASAD AT HIS WORD THAT GIVEN THE ENFLAMED AND DYNAMIC REGIONAL SITUATION, SYRIAN POLICY WILL MOVE TOWARD ITS TRADITIONAL DEFAULT OF 'WAITING,' WHILE PLAYING TO THE ARAB STREET. END COMMENT.

KATTOUF